

# Wader Quest Articles



SUPPORTING SHOREBIRD CONSERVATION

Registered Charity (England and Wales)  
1183748

## Wader Quest Objectives:

To raise public awareness about, and to promote an understanding and appreciation of, waders or shorebirds (birds of the sub order Charadrii and to include the family Turnicidae, as defined by the Handbook of Birds of the World Volume 3 del Hoyo, Elliott and Sargatal eds 1996).

To raise funds, which, at the discretion of the Board of Trustees, is to be used to make small grants or carry out appeals for wader conservation projects worldwide.

To promote for the benefit of the public the conservation and protection of waders or shorebirds and improvements of their physical and natural habitats.

To advance the education of the public regarding the conservation and protection of waders or shorebirds and their natural habitats.

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## A mythical Māori bird is gone, but its name still lives on (albeit in an extinct bird!) - By Rick and Elis Simpson

This is a story that would sit well in the pages of *An Inspiration of Waders*, our last book where we investigated how waders have inspired, among other things, myths and legends.

This is the story of the *Hakawai*, a mythical bird among the Māori people a bird that was said to have been seldom seen but more frequently heard at night, when its unearthly calls would send shivers down the spine of those who heard it. This was partly because of the strangeness of the call, but also as it was supposed to be a portent of war or some other bad event. The *Hakawai* was believed to be one of eleven *tapu* which were sacred

birds of *Raka-maomao*, a wind god. It was said that the *Hakawai* only descended to earth at night, spending their days in the firmament. It was believed to be a large bird, like a colourful, giant (reputed to be the size of a Moa *Dinornis* sp.) bird of prey.

The strength and persistence of the of the legend led some ornithologists to speculate whether the sounds attributed to this fearsome beast were actually those of a real species of bird.

European settlement caused the loss of much in the way of species and habitat. Along with this the Māori way of life started to disappear. But reports of the *Hakawai* still occurred in the islands off the south of South Island, in an area where Muttonbird chicks (Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus*) were still collected for food and oil.

In the 1980s an ornithologist by the name of Miskelly was studying the



South Island Snipe © Don Merton [1]

*Coenocorypha* genus of New Zealand Snipes (later co-describing a new subspecies of South Island Snipe *C. aucklandica perseverance* – Miskelly & Baker 2010). When he heard a recording of the unusual sound of the aerial display of the Chatham Snipe *Coenocorypha pusilla* he wondered if the peculiar sound of the snipes was connected to the Māori myth. He started investigating and interviewed several muttonbird hunters, some of whom had memories of hearing the *Hakawai*.

It transpired that the demise of the New Zealand Snipes as they became extirpated from the land, mirrored the disappearance of the occurrences of reports of hearing the legendary *Hakawai*. Both legend and South Island Snipe were last reported from the Muttonbird Islands. Gradually the islands became infested with predators introduced by man. These included rats, cats and the Weka *Gallirallus australis*, a New Zealand endemic, predatory rail, which may too have been introduced to the islands. The last of the South Island Snipes died in 1964 due to the accidental introduction of rats on their last refuge of Big South Cape Island.

Interestingly, despite its apparent remoteness, the extinct New Zealand endemic bird, now endowed with the mythical bird's name, *Hakawai melvillei*, seems to be the



*Hakawai melvillei* © Derek Onley

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missing link between Plains-wanderer *Pedionmus torquatus* of Australia and the South American Seedsnipes *Thinocorus* spp. which researchers had long suspected. It appears that all three evolved in East Gondwana. The fossils of the *Hakawai* are from the Miocene period between 19 and 16 million years ago. In those times, New Zealand was subtropical and covered with forest. The *Hakawai* would have evolved and become an extinct endemic after Gondwana split up and, as the climate changed with its movement geographically, it slowly died out.

The specific part of the bird's name *melvillei* honours New Zealand ornithologist David Melville who has contributed much to the conservation of migratory waders.

[1] The photograph of the South Island Snipe was taken by the late Don Merton a former senior member of the New Zealand Department of Conservation (DOC). The photograph was taken of a captive bird at Puai, Big South Cape Island. With thanks to DOC.

[2] With thanks to Dave Boyle who generously allowed us to use this photograph reproduced here and on the Wader Quest website.

Sources:

De Pietri, Vanesa L.; Scofield, R. Paul; Tennyson, Alan J. D.; Hand, Suzanne J.; Worthy, Trevor H. (2015). "Wading a lost southern connection: Miocene fossils from New Zealand reveal a new lineage of shorebirds (Charadriiformes) linking Gondwanan avifaunas". *Journal of Systematic Palaeontology*. 14 (7): 603. doi:10.1080/14772019.2015.1087064. hdl:2328/35949.

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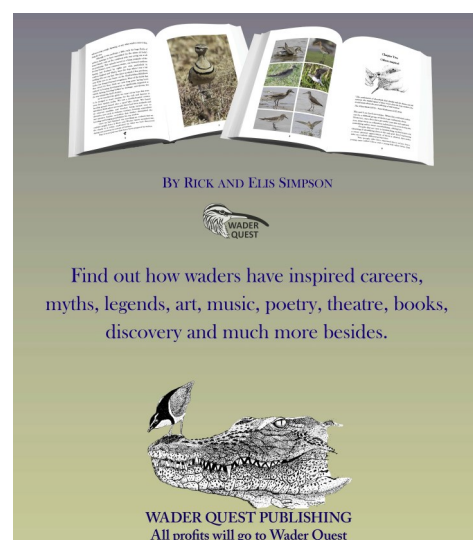
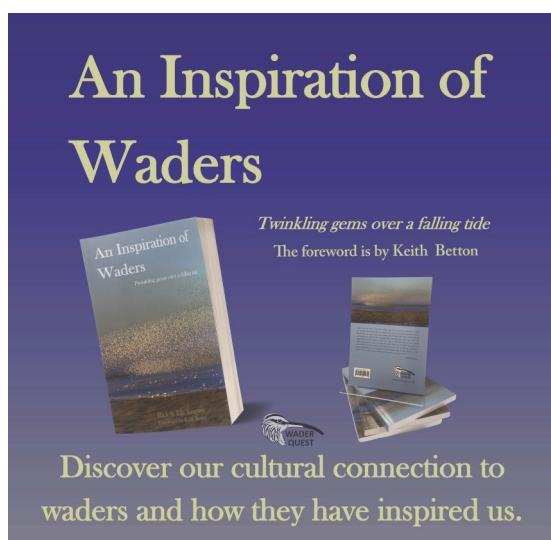
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hakawai\\_\(mythology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hakawai_(mythology))



Chatham Snipe © Dave Boyle [2]



Least Seedsnipe © Elis Simpson



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